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1 C123 Pilot Flew Aid Mission for U.S.

Cooper Made Earlier State Dept. Flight With Nonmilitary Supplies

By Joe Pichirallo
Washington Post Staff Writer

X MIAMI, Oct. 10—William J. Cooper, the pilot of the plane shot down over Nicaragua carrying weapons to rebels fighting there, flew at least one mission to Central America for the State Department office that supplied humanitarian aid to the anti-Sandinista forces, a U.S. official said today.

Cooper may have been the owner of a second camouflaged C123 cargo plane that was being serviced until a day or two ago at Southern Air facilities at the Miami International Airport. That plane flew out of Miami for Honduras early yesterday, according to FAA records.

Cooper "was the pilot for one of the aircraft we chartered for humanitarian assistance from the United States to Central America," said Philip J. Buechler, the U.S. official who is the operations coordinator for the program.

Buechler, whose business card was found in the wallet of another crew member from the downed plane, said the State Department's humanitarian aid office had nothing to do with the flight that was shot down.

The office, which was charged with dispensing \$27 million in aid approved by Congress last year, was barred by law from supplying the anti-Sandinista rebels, known as contras or counterrevolutionaries, with military assistance.

Cooper, 62, a U.S. Navy veteran who flew missions during the Vietnam war for Air America, a now defunct CIA-owned airline, was killed along with two others—Blaine Sawyer Jr. and an unidentified man—when their Fairchild C123K transport plane was shot down Sunday by Sandinista units.

A fourth man, Eugene Hasenfus, who was captured by the Sandinista forces, has charged that CIA operatives supervised the flight—claims strongly denied by U.S. officials.



~~THIS WILL IDENTIFY~~
WILLIAM J. COOPER

CAPTAIN

8562

SOUTHERN AIR TRANSPORT

UNITED PRESS INTERNATIONAL

Credential issued by Miami-based air cargo firm to C123 pilot William Cooper.

The downed C123 cargo plane had been serviced several times this year by Southern Air Transport Inc., a Miami-based air cargo and charter firm that was once secretly owned by the CIA. A Southern Air employee credential issued to Cooper was found in the plane's wreckage. A company spokesman has said that Southern Air did not own the plane and that Cooper was issued the credential so he could get access to the firm's facilities while he supervised maintenance on the C123.

Cooper was supervising the maintenance of a second C123 at Southern Air, according to William Kress, Southern's spokesman. He added that officials of Southern Air did not know who owned it.

According to Federal Aviation Administration records, the second C123, which reporters spotted at Southern Air this week, flew out of the Miami airport at 5:23 a.m. today.

The plane's pilot filed a flight plan with the FAA showing that it was bound for Catacamas, Honduras, which is about 10 miles from Aguacate, a U.S.-built air base used by the contras in Honduras. Hasenfus, the captured American, said in

Nicaragua on Thursday that he had been on four flights carrying arms and ammunition to the contras that flew out of Aguacate.

Robert Buckhorn, an FAA spokesman, said the only identification on the plane's flight plan is the pilot's last name, identified as "McRaney."

Cooper, saying that he represented an entity called Corporate Air Service Inc., purchased the plane in July from a Southern California aircraft dealer named Ascher Ward, Ward said in an interview with Washington Post staff writer Jay Mathews.

Ward, who said he recognized Cooper's name from news reports, said he met with Cooper and unidentified others, once in Tucson, Ariz., and on another occasion in the Los Angeles area in May or June. Ward said Cooper told him he was putting together a fleet of planes for Corporate Air Service.

It is unclear whether Corporate Air Service actually exists. According to Bobbie Mardis, an FAA spokeswoman, the only record the agency has on the plane is a July 8 request from Joseph Kappa, a Sepulveda, Calif., air mechanic, to reserve the plane's registration for Corporate Air Service.

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Kappa said in an interview Thursday that he contacted the FAA at Ward's request. Kappa told the FAA that the address for Corporate Air Service was 3500 NW 64th Ave., Miami, which is the address for Southern Air Transport.

Company spokesman Kress said today that the firm is unfamiliar with Corporate Air Service and has no ties to it.

Nicaragua's military intelligence chief, Capt. Ricardo Wheelock, has said that Hasenfus and documents from the downed plane refer to an entity called Corporate Air Service being involved with planes supplying the contras. Buechler, the State

Department aid official, said that Corporate Air Service and Southern Air Transport were not among the four or five firms hired to fly clothing, medical supplies and other non-military assistance to the contras.

Buechler declined to identify the companies that were hired, citing security concerns. He said the aid office worked closely with the United Nicaraguan Opposition (UNO), the contras' umbrella group, and UNO recruited the air charter firms that were hired by the United States. He said the flights, which began in September 1985 and ran through last May, left from either Miami, New Orleans or Dulles International Airport outside Washington.

Buechler said he does not recall where he met Cooper. "These crew members change from day to day from company to company," said Buechler, who added that the crews for the aid flights were hired by the individual companies, not the State Department.

The crew member's wallet that contained Buechler's business card also had a business card for a Robert W. Owen.

Buechler said that, at the request of top UNO officials, his office hired Owen as a consultant to serve as a liaison with the contras. As a private citizen, Owen was able to travel to Central America and observe any problems with distribution, Buechler said.

Owen could not be reached for comment today.

News reports have alleged that Owen is an associate of Lt. Col. Oliver North, a member of the National Security Council staff.